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ABSTRACT

Recent books and scholarly journals directed to English composition teachers reveal something like conceptual chaos, a Babel of mutually unintelligible academic tongues. "New Professional Compositionism" has taken a fundamentally wrong view of the relationship between knowledge (including theoretical knowledge) and practice. An examination of case studies of such "applied" scholarship leads to a "reactionary" view of what is left after the dust settles. Albert Kitzhaber published an influential study of college writing instruction, "Themes, Theories, and Therapy," (1963) in which he opined that in the future, college English departments would no longer have to offer writing courses but could teach literature (as they had been trained) because high schools would demand more rigorous work from their students. The fault lines of generative/transformational grammar's "implications for practice" clearly manifested themselves in the research of Kellogg Hunt into syntactic maturity and the subsequent curriculum projects aimed at syntactic maturity acceleration. The classroom-oriented John Mellon and Frank O'Hare developed programs of sentence-combining drills for high school students, habituating them to write longer, denser clauses. But English teachers rated Mellon's control group's less syntactically mature writing as "better" writing. Sidney Dobrin's "Constructing Knowledges" (1997) expresses enthusiasm for recent composition theory. For students, "What works?" is the pertinent question, not "From what research findings, epistemologies, political ideologies, and other theories should the profession derive its direction?" (Contains 23 references.) (NKA)

Applied This, Applied That, And The Other: The Counterproductive Professionalization of Composition Teaching

by Jeff Zorn

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Applied This, That, and the Other: The Counterproductive Professionalization of Composition Teaching

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The good college writing teacher of the 1950's and early 1960's was a gifted amateur, improvising at every step. He or she need not have been in an English department. My best writing teachers at Dartmouth were both classicists. I learned in individual sessions with them, as I had not learned in high school, prewriting strategies, the value of a thesis statement and plans for its development, transition from point to point, appropriate tone, appropriate diction, research strategies, quotation technique, and effective beginnings and endings.

The classicists' qualifications to offer writing instruction were of many sorts. First, they were excellent writers themselves. Second, they had developed self-aware perspective on both their development as writers and their processes of composition. Third, having read much student writing carefully, they could offer clear, accurate diagnoses of papers' strengths and weaknesses. Fourth, they had developed effective prescriptions for remediating weaknesses. Finally, they were generous, helpful mentors, with a strong "teacherly" spirit.

The successes of such instructors can in no way be gainsaid. They performed the role of composition instructor as well as it could be done, at that place at that time. Similar successes by composition instructors today should enjoy the same recognition, whatever the individual's academic training, departmental affiliation, and knowledge of research and theory "applied" to classroom teaching.

For three decades the leadership of the National Council of Teachers of English has invested very heavily in this "applied" scholarship, hoping to ground composition teaching in something more intellectually and professionally compelling than the working knowledge of experienced, successful practitioners. One is rated as a professional today in large measure by his or her familiarity with this body of scholarship, and the highest prestige and rewards within the field go to its producers.

The general effort of application-to-practice can claim no apparent success. Nothing in the results of testing or anecdotal observation yet suggests a general improvement in high school and college students' reading and writing during the time of the New Professionalism. (See, e.g., the 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress trends in reading and writing.) Something nearer the opposite seems the case: a lowering of performance and expectation in the very period of the profession's allegedly great advances.

Not coincidentally, recent books and editions of scholarly journals directed to English composition teachers reveal something like conceptual chaos, a Babel of mutually unintelligible academic tongues. The reader encounters an assemblage of applied this, applied that, applied the other: researchers talking past everyone else's work and basing general claims for practice on the narrowest of explorations; theorists and ideologists plying their various wares and then in throwaway sections at the end advancing trite or baffling classroom applications.

New Professional Compositionism has taken, I believe, a

fundamentally wrong view of the relationship between knowledge (including theoretical knowledge) and practice. This has resulted in a persistent overestimation of implications and applications and a closely related derogation of the labor of practitioners. I examine case-studies of such "applied" scholarship and conclude with an unabashedly reactionary view of what is left after the dust settles.

I.

In 1963 Albert Kitzhaber published an influential and perceptive study of college writing instruction (coincidentally based at Dartmouth), Themes, Theories, and Therapy. Among more flattering features, the book stands out for recording a painfully over-optimistic prediction on the performance of U.S. college students in formal exposition.

Projecting from the improvements seen in colleges over the past five or six years, Kitzhaber found no reason to doubt that the important trends were "bound to continue" (96). High schools, now safely past the distractions of Progressive Education, would demand ever-more rigorous work from their students; students would continue applying themselves full-bore to that academic work; colleges then would select from ever-more qualified applicants.

In the near-future, wrote Kitzhaber, college English departments would no longer have to offer writing courses per se. Composition would be omitted entirely or "taught incidentally and grudgingly" (97). Instead, professors could teach literature, as they had been trained. Kitzhaber welcomed improvements in high

school composition teaching precisely because he had seen the general reluctance and the general inability of college English departments to carry the load.

Especially promising to Kitzhaber was the application of theoretical advances in generative-transformational (g/t) grammar to English classes. More accurate descriptions of language-production would lead almost automatically to more efficient learning of language by elementary and secondary students; their greater skill in composing would then free their college teachers to teach literary analysis and rhetoric.

Noam Chomsky himself had tried to warn off exactly the kind of "pedagogical implication" that Kitzhaber was pushing:

> I am, frankly, rather skeptical about the significance, for the teaching of langauges, of such insights and understandings as have been attained in linguistics and psychology. It is difficult to believe that either linguistics or psychology has attained a level of theoretical understanding that might enable it to support a technology of language teaching.(Linguistic Theory 43)

Chomsky also foresaw how tempting it would be for language educators to mistake his kernel-transformation account of grammatical competence for a psychologically real depiction of speaking or writing performance (Aspects 4).

The fault-lines of g/t grammar's "implications for practice" clearly manifested themselves in the research of Kellogg Hunt into syntactic maturity (NCTE Research Report #3, 1965) and the subsequent curriculum projects aimed at syntactic maturity

acceleration. By 1978 one would read four consecutive syntactic maturity articles in an issue of Research in the Teaching of English, all perfectly observing the statistical niceties of social science experimentation, none making any sense about teaching writing.

Hunt's Grammatical Structures at Three Grade Levels was described a decade later as "a landmark..., with its normative data the basis for much of the transformational grammar and sentence combining research done after it" (Abrahamson). Encountering references to the "norms" Hunt had established at the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade levels, one might infer a subject pool of thousands of tested students. In fact, Hunt examined the writing of exactly fifty-four students, nine boys and nine girls at each of the three grade levels. These students, all white, attended a school on the Florida State University campus where it proved "barely possible" to find eighteen students per grade level who scored as low as 110 on the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test.

Hunt found that older students generally wrote longer and grammatically denser sentences than younger students. What inspired him to recommend a project of accelerating this process was the mistaken view that one could read directly back from more "mature" sentences to a brain making more powerful transformation and embedment moves. This was exactly the competence-perfomance confusion that Chomsky had warned of.

Followers such as John Mellon and Frank O'Hare were English educators with much closer ties to the classroom than Hunt. Their monographs (NCTE Research Reports #10 and #15, respectively)

assimilated Hunt's methodology but none of his cognitivism. Offering no clear reason, both claimed a general plus-value for accelerated syntactic complexity as a rhetorical or literary gain.

Mellon and O'Hare developed programs of sentence-combining drills for high school students, habituating them to write longer, denser clauses. The writers' pre- and post-treatment sentences were then compared to those of control groups receiving no such treatment. Both experimental treatments were successful in stimulating gains in syntactic complexity, and both monographs ended with strong advocacy of implementing such treatments in English classrooms.

In an ancillary study, however, Mellon was surprised to find that English teachers holistically rated his control group's less syntactically mature writing as <u>better</u> writing. Obviously the experimental-group students were trying very hard to impress with their new-found powers of clausal embedment, but the results were predictably clumsy, forced, and pretentious.

Both Mellon and O'Hare seemed so impressed with Hunt's "hard" research as to deny their best instincts as writing teachers. Classroom practice demands the inculcation of <u>judgment</u> in students, an element lacking in Hunt's gathering of linguistic data. Some short, simple sentences are too bare of detail and leave important connections implicit; others are perfect in context. Likewise the densely modified, thick sentences Hunt, Mellon, and O'Hare valued unconditionally: Is an insurance contract, swollen with excruciating jargon, better writing than Orwell's <u>Homage To Catalonia</u>?

The problem here is best understood as a mismatch of community interests. Hunt's work was a continuation of a research tradition within the Progressive child-study movement. Mellon and O'Hare, English teachers, crossed into the territory of "genetic psychology" as naive tourists. They returned with a trinket of factual knowledge--Older kids' sentences show more clause embedments than younger kids' sentences--that had an entirely different significance back home, in an English classroom concerned with the intellectual and communicative quality of expository writing.

This move from the Kellogg Hunt level of research to the John Mellon level of classroom application became ubiquitous in the following years, ubiquitous and, in my mind at least, the source of folly untold. It was as if we scrounged for academic support and academic recognition, twisting and turning our syllabi to accommodate new-found expertise from some or other branch of linguistics, rhetorical theory, communication theory, cognitive psychology, semiotics, feminism, neo-Marxism, etc. In the process, the very aims of composition teaching, centrally the aim to guide students to write better expository prose of the sort expected of them in college, got lost; and the qualities of the good composition teacher--an ear for the language, a commitment to the norms of the academy, endless energy for grading and teaching--were replaced with other desiderata, far less relevant to the job description, a matter of talking the game instead of playing it.

Flashing ahead, the surprise about to be described should not have been one. The fact of its being a surprise, a near-contradiction, exposes a central flaw in New Professional Composition thinking.

Sidney Dobrin's Constructing Knowledges: The Politics of Theory-Building and Pedagogy in Composition (1997) expresses great enthusiasm for recent composition theory. Chapter by chapter Dobrin explicates the thinking of a theorist or a school of theorists (Foucault, feminists, liberation educators, etc.) and then reports on attempts to apply that thinking in the classroom. The book's primary audience seems to be composition instructors and graduate students who have not yet climbed on the theory bandwagon, in Dobrin's mind because we do not think about composition sufficiently intellectually.

In a key passage Dobrin discusses Richard Rorty's anti-foundationalist epistemology. Rorty's work, regularly cited in composition journals and conference sessions, argues that thought is so wrapped up in particular language-forms that we can never step out of language to apprehend "pure reality." As Dobrin writes,

> {Rorty} views the epistemological traditions of Western philosophy as an attempt to find foundational, secure, and perhaps permanent truths and knowledges when, instead, we should regard knowledge and truth as social practices, matters bound up in the metaphor of language. (65)

The surprise appears in Dobrin's response to Gary Olson's interview with Rorty. Asked about his sense of what a freshman

English course should be, Rorty replies, "I think the idea of freshman English, mostly, is just to get them to write complete sentences, get the commas in the right place, and stuff like that--the stuff we would like to think the high schools do and, in fact, they don't" (Dobrin 69; Olson 232).

Dobrin seems shocked by what he clearly takes to be Rorty's pedestrian thinking--freshman English as a mere "service course," not the post-Modernist celebration of ambiguity, uncertainty, and "multiple perspectives" that Dobrin and others both favor and understand as following from Rorty's thinking. With no direct connection to "reality," writing should be exploratory, flexible, and devoid of the false certainty defining the academic style. Teaching should encourage this playfulness. An anti-foundationalist of Rorty's stature should hardly be so drably conservative about composition pedagogy, and so a disappointed Dobrin comments:

> ...even those scholars whose work provides the theoretical basis on which current theoretical and practical pursuits--knowledge making--are put forward have difficulty letting go of the traditional view of the composition classroom <u>even when what seems to be the core of their argument may suggest otherwise</u>. (69-70; emphasis added)

Dobrin's expectations for Rorty are entirely unfounded. What Dobrin misses are the many levels of thinking between so abstract a realm as the foundationalism debate and so practical a realm as teaching student-writers at a particular college or university in the United States in the late twentieth century.

Those who "apply" Rorty in the ways Dobrin is aware of have not engaged in a logical deduction from Rortian first principles through syllogisms to a series of conclusions about syllabi, assignments, grading standards, and so forth. Dobrin's verb "may suggest" is altogether correct. Rorty's thinking has suggested further lines of thought to them, which, combined with other theories they hold about schools, language, politics, psychology, ethics, and so on, lead ultimately to the favored English 101 syllabus. The connections are in every case quirky and idiosyncratic. One gets "on board" or "off board" at any stage.

Rorty himself takes an entirely different route from his appliers, never reaching back to his philosophical scholarship on language and reality for a source of knowledge about freshman comp. Instead, his policy thinking seems based entirely on the quality of the student writing he reads, with the only pertinent question to him being "What do these students need to improve?" In this, Rorty is on qualitatively firmer ground than his appliers.

In another context Rorty reports surprising post-Modern leftists with his political views. They are hostile to him upon finding that he does not

> participate in what Jonathan Yardley has called the "America Sucks Sweepstakes." Participants in this event compete to find better, bitterer ways of describing the United States....I see America pretty much as Whitman and Dewey did, as opening a prospect on illimitable democratic vistas..., an example of the best kind of society so far invented. (Edmundson 32-33)

The philosophical iconoclast, Rorty describes his politics as "pretty much those of Hubert Humphrey" (48).

One thinks here of Antonio Gramsci, whose analysis of "cultural hegemony" informs so many critical theorists' understanding of our oppressive educational system. But Gramsci himself favored the strictest traditional education, including years of mandatory Greek and Latin lessons for all children, to discipline their minds. The political revolutionary was the staunchest educational reactionary, far to the right of, say, William Bennett. Dobrin, typically, is blind to discrepancy of this sort.

The point here relates strongly to a paradigm-shift in departments of philosophy of education. Prior to the total triumph of conceptual analysis in such departments, their work consisted of laying out grand schools of thought like empiricism, rationalism, and pragmatism and then tracing the educational implications. They taught that empiricist educators would emphasize hands-on work, rationalists abstract work like geometry, and pragmatists vocationalism (Burns and Blauner; Scheffler).

The next generation of philosophers of education argued persuasively that such "implications" were phantasms. The business of teaching reading, e.g., would be carried on best by those who had studied the pertinent scholarship, then developed and refined a plan for moving children from here to there. The controversy over whole language and phonics awaits no resolution of the controversy between philosophical realism and idealism.

The shoe fits New Professional Compositionism like Cinderella's glass slipper. Its "knowledges" come from far afield, and it undervalues or ignores the closer-up thinking that directly informs practice. With Lenin and Richard Ohmann both Marxist theorists of education and the same Catholic dogma producing Augustine, Newman, Maritain, and Illich, it is purposefulness, not intellectual laziness, that drives practitioners away from the theory-work on which Dobrin bestows such encomiastic attention.

Dobrin applauds the rise of departments of composition studies dominated by theorists whose work may or may not have direct application to the work of composition teaching itself. Some progress: From the literature departments of the 1950's, where composition teaching was a neglected, undervalued occupation to composition studies departments of the late 1990's, where composition teaching is again a neglected, undervalued occupation.

III.

Recent attempts to historicize and politicize English teaching come with heavy ideological baggage. Books, articles, and anthologies call for reforming practice as the "pedagogical implication" of a radical political analysis of school-in-society. These studies place all but the most heavy-handedly political practitioners in the most unfavorable of lights.

Often the scholarship has a "much ado about nothing" character to it, with a huge imbalance between the ideology-making and the curriculum-making. James Berlin's "Composition and

Cultural Studies," for example, builds on politically charged theorizing to describe an experimental course in freshman English at Purdue University. Berlin writes,

> {T}he Marxist dimensions of the Birmingham group become central. The relation between the social and the subjective is imbricated in the economic, political, and cultural considerations that are always ideological and historically specific. (49)

The course will "encourage our students to resist and to negotiate these codes--these hegemonic discourses--in order to bring about more personally humane and socially equitable economic and political arrangements" (50).

Reading on, however, one finds that this weighty ideological purpose boils down to a slight twist on an assignment given everywhere--the "advertisement critique" essay. The only apparent difference is that Berlin and his associates came right out and told students what they thought and forced the students to engage their ideas in writing the essay. Instead of assigning a reading on advertisements, the instructors divulged their own "contestatory and socialist views." Composition teaching like this, Berlin concludes, will result in "a more open and tolerant society, one in which the full possibilities of democracy might be openly explored" (54).

The inescapable image here is of a sandwich with a huge slab of airy Wonder bread underneath, a huge slab of airy Wonder bread of top, and a very small piece of meat or cheese in between. Writings in Marxism, feminism, critical theory, and culture studies applied to the composition classroom all tend toward this shape of the mostly bread sandwich.

Susan Miller's article, "Composition as a Cultural Artifact: Rethinking History as Theory," bemoans the lack of impact of neo-Marxist cultural history like hers; it has "done less to influence the conduct of composition than its scholarly excellence warrants" (20). Miller demands to know "why the field's new theories and research have so little purchase on its continuing practice" (21).

Miller's historiography is richly detailed, but its ideological loading answers perfectly well her questions about its lack of impact. For all its line-by-line "excellence," Miller's piece is of a type of educational writing familiar since the middle '60's: the collusion-with-evil-capitalism diatribe.

Exactly as Miller's predecessors-- Michael Katz, Bowles and Gintis, Carnoy and Levin, etc.--read Marxist functionalism into the "economic outcomes" of public schooling, Miller reads her neo-Marxist, Bourdieu/Gramsci/Althusser source materials into late-19th century developments in the college English curriculum, e.g., the abandonment of public rhetoric for "individual" expression and the move to correct errors in spelling and grammar. Miller's historiography admits of nothing anomalous and nothing extraneous; everything the English educators did fits into the hegemonic scheme. What was, was evil; what has been carried forward, remains evil.

Thinking like this leads Miller to the mistaken view that her own recommendations for practice, conceived in reaction to what evil capitalist lackeys have done, are somehow special--ideologically pure, protected from error or, worse, mere triviality. But all of her suggestions for reform could have

been written by a far less ideologically committed compositionist; all, in fact, already have been, in slightly different words. The bread is different, but the filling is the same ol' Swiss.

In addition, these suggestions are in direct conflict with those of equally committed leftist/liberationist writers, in effect nullifying all the polemics that precede the recommendations for practice. Miller's take on public vs. subjective "individual" discourse, for instance, can be usefully compared with that of Henry Giroux. Showing a righteous leftist indignation at least the equal of Miller's, Giroux tears into American schools for denying students their voices; the demand for public discourse conditions students to participate in the inequities and immoralities of society. Such public rhetoric as Miller favors, Giroux understands as "colonizing" students, who need to be rewarded for their own ideas in their own voices--voices that will lead to "the creation of new and radical forms of community" (71).

So, Hobson's Choice: As a practitioner I'm conspiring with evil--I am evil-- if I go with traditional public rhetoric, and I'm conspiring with evil--I am evil-- if I go with personal expression.

The same dilemma arises in a multicultural variant of Miller and Giroux's work. Jane Sapon-Shevin and Nancy Schniedewind argue that, unlike whites, people of color are repelled by individualizing competitions, hierarchy, and authoritarianism; instead, they prefer cooperation and egalitarian group work. Putting their children in the traditional class is an act of

outright racism, the authors conclude, "further alienating them from majority culture" (163). Sapon-Shevin and Schniedewind's anti-racist alternative is cooperative process pedagogy.

Ooops: In her very influential article "Falling Asleep and Failure Among African-American Students: Rethinking Assumptions About Process Teaching," Emalie V. Siddle Walker concludes that process pedagogy itself is racist. The Black students she studied relied on their culture to tune out group-work and to conclude that process-model teachers did not care enough to try to teach them. They preferred traditional structures and teaching styles, complete with individual competitions and strong-handed authority.

So, given choices A and B, you choose A and you're racist, and you choose B and you're racist. You choose A and you're the lick-spittle toady of the ruling class, and you choose B and you're the lick-spittle toady of the ruling class. In practice, the only sensible conclusion is to ignore criticisms like these and continue following your highest ideals and best instincts as a teacher. In the end, some educators of all political persuasions will agree with the best conceived and most efficacious parts of your practice.

Had another ideologue encountered just Miller's concluding curriculum suggestion--"teaching students to enjoy the variable relations of writers to their texts" (31)--out of the context of her Marxist-feminist historiography, attacks on her bourgeois claptrap would have boomed out: The hegemonic valorization of enjoyment in a post-industrial economy! The symbolic significance of variability to an increasingly mobile managerial class! All

attacks like these are best shrugged off by the serious practitioner as someone else's business.

IV.

Composition teaching can be successful, in the terms I set initially with my Dartmouth mentors, entirely without the benefit of "applied" scholarship. To be a good writing teacher is just that; it explains itself. Like writing, teaching writing is something one learns how to do. The better writing teacher is not such by virtue of any advantage in knowing-that, any more than the better bassoonist is such by virtue of greater knowledge of particle physics or aesthetic theory.

Gilbert Ryle's classic The Concept of Mind develops the proficiency of the circus clown in similar terms. The advantage, Ryle demonstrates, is in the ability seen in the performance itself, not in superior knowledge of or more effective thinking about clowning and its constituent skills. Clowning is one performance, not two: Just a well timed pratfall, not a bit of theorizing and then a bit of falling. Again, reading "applied" studies of cognition, kinesthetics, humor theory, and ideological polemic will not make anyone any better a clown.

Over the period of New Professional Compositionism, the great majority of practitioners have been like the ancients described by M.I. Finley:

> The Greeks themselves did not develop a theory of democracy. There were notions, maxims, generalities, but these do not add up to a systematic theory. The

> philosophers attacked democracy; the committed democrats responded by ignoring them, by going about the business of government and politics in a democratic way. (28)

In much the same fashion, English composition teachers have been going about the business of guiding students through a key transition-point between secondary and higher education, tutoring them to find the words and the structures through which to develop their ideas and contribute to public intellectual discourse in the university and beyond. In this work, the work, the guild's only work, we have been overshadowed and often denigrated by voices deemed the profession's most authoritative.

The individuals we teach are what matter: the particular Janets and Renelitos before us MWF, 10:20-11:30, taking three other courses and carrying many other responsibilities. In the short time allotted we try to add something to their lives, stimulating accomplishments with powerful near and far rewards.

If that is seen as "service work," a phrase sure to infuriate any New Professional Compositionist, so be it. I resolved to become a teacher at a civil rights rally after hearing the lyric "If I can help somebody as I pass along this way, then my living shall not be in vain." Nothing in the intervening thirty years has suggested to me a more legitimate reason to teach.

Susan Miller's crowning sentence snootily declares: "An isolated 'individual,' imagined even now after Althusser as independently experiencing life outside the language, rituals, and behaviors that construct it, becomes the imagined 'real' subject of this course" (29). "Even now after Althusser"??!! Name-

dropping of this kind tells much of the tale of New Professional Composition, its attitude of "How can you possibly teach college writing in the absence of knowledge that I have?!?" Perfectly well, thank you very much, perfectly well.

All my students are individuals--no shudder-quotes needed. Their thoughts, their lives, have markers of social influence and cultural patterning, but their individuality remains and, with that, the fact of their unique potentials, not limitless but grand enough to inspire my best efforts. Their tries at college-level prose always show that they could use some help; such help is at the heart of the entire endeavor of educating them.

Their helpers, from whatever discipline, will be "professional" writing teachers by virtue of a careful, persistent effort to improve their practice. "What works?" is the pertinent question for them, not "From what research findings, epistemologies, political ideologies, and other theories should the profession derive its direction?" The latter question has led to the the wrong publications being subsidized and lionized, the wrong programs being adopted, the wrong readings assigned, the wrong assignments set, the wrong grades given, the wrong people hired and fired, and less gain than could have been expected against the semi-literacy plaguing American schools and colleges.

Administrative and logistical arrangements for composition will necessarily differ from institution to institution (Phelps). I offer no support for housing composition inside an English department, in its own program, a writing center, or across the curriculum. My sole intent has been to advance a repositioning of teaching and the scholarship applied to it. Instruction in formal

academic exposition must re-assume professional primacy, with classroom teachers reaching out for assistance as they themselves recognize the need in their practice and judging all would-be contributions in reference to that practice. Professional

publication, recruitment, status, and rewards should be adjusted accordingly.

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